

# The Bestial Glans: Gentile Christ Followers and the Monstrous Nudity of Ancient Circumcision

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## Abstract

This article takes seriously the stigmatization of circumcision by non-Jews in order to suggest a new frame of reference for understanding how circumcision was received in early Pauline communities, specifically the Galatians. I argue that the internal evidence of Galatians suggests that the majority of the Galatian assemblies did not want to be circumcised at all. From Paul's perspective, they were being coerced against their will, and coercion implies force. Thus, the burden of proof lies with those who argue that the community was ready and willing to circumcise instead of being forced to circumcise against their will. When we turn to the reception of circumcision by non-Jews outside of Galatians, it becomes clear that Paul's gentile audiences, by social and cultural default, would not have wanted to be circumcised. In ancient visual culture, circumcision was associated with *Mischwesen* (sub-human creatures), centaurs in particular. The phallic synonymity Jewish circumcision shared with ancient, circumcised centaurs coloured it with sexual dysfunction and aesthetic deformity.

## Keywords

circumcision, Jews, *Mischwesen*, centaurs, gentiles, Paul, Galatians

## 1. Introduction

Scholars of ancient Judaism(s) have long known about the negative attitudes toward circumcision expressed in non-Jewish literature.<sup>1</sup> Despite the wealth of

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<sup>1</sup> E.g., Louis H. Feldman, *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World: Attitudes and Interactions from Alexander to Justinian* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 155–158; Peter Schäfer, *Judeophobia: Attitudes toward the Jews in the Ancient World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 93–105; John M. G. Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora: From Alexander to Trajan (323 BCE–117 CE)* (Edinburgh: T&T

research done on the reception of circumcision in the ancient world, only a handful of NT scholars have brought the stigma of circumcision in the Graeco-Roman world to bear on the NT itself.<sup>2</sup> Using the pagan attitude toward circumcision as a foundation, Troy Martin argues that Paul's circumcision was the "weakness of the flesh" (ἀσθένεια τῆς σαρκός) mentioned in Gal 4:13.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, Martin's argument is not convincing because he provides no explicit textual connection to circumcision in Gal 4:13. Although Martin may be incorrect about the relevance of circumcision for Paul's "weakness of the flesh," he may not be wrong about the general attitude the Galatians had toward circumcision.

As traditional scholarship holds, circumcision was enough of a problem among non-Jews in Paul's communities that he felt he needed to write against it, first with Galatians and then briefly in passing with Philippians (Phil 3:2). But the way Paul describes the Galatian predicament, along with the stigma concerning circumcision among non-Jews, should give us pause about whether Paul's rhetoric against circumcision should be understood as proportionate to the desire among some gentile Christ-followers to actually be circumcised.

In this essay I want to take seriously the stigmatization of circumcision by non-Jews in order to suggest a new frame of reference for understanding how circumcision was understood in early Pauline communities, specifically the

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Clark, 1999), 438–439; Martin Goodman, "Trajan and the Origins of Roman Hostility to the Jews," *Past & Present* 182 (2004): 12; Erich S. Gruen, "Roman Perspectives on the Jews in the Age of the Great Revolt," in *The First Jewish Revolt: Archaeology, History, and Ideology*, ed. Andrea M. Berlin and J. Andrew Overman (London: Routledge, 2002), 28; Benjamin Isaac, *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 472–474; Zvi Yavetz, "Judeophobia in Classical Antiquity: A Different Approach," *JJS* 44 (1993): 14; Louis H. Feldman, "Anti-Semitism in the Ancient World," in *History and Hate: The Dimensions of Anti-Semitism*, ed. David Berger (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1986), 31; John G. Gager, *The Origins of Anti-Semitism: Attitudes toward Judaism in Pagan and Christian Antiquity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 56; Ben Witherington III, *Grace in Galatia: A Commentary on St. Paul's Letter to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 455–456; J. N. Sevenster, *The Roots of Pagan Anti-Semitism in the Ancient World* (NovTSup 41; Leiden: Brill, 1975), 134.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Ben Witherington makes note of how circumcision was received in the ancient world, but it does not affect his interpretation of Galatians. Witherington III, *Grace in Galatia: A Commentary on St. Paul's Letter to the Galatians*, 446, 455–456. Cf. also James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (BNTC; London: Continuum, 1993), 336.

<sup>3</sup> Troy W. Martin, "Whose Flesh? What Temptation? (Gal 4.13–14)," *JSNT* 74 (1999): 87–90.

Galatians. Did gentiles in Paul's assemblies really want to be circumcised? What evidence do we have that Paul's Galatian audience *actually wanted* to be circumcised? Put another way, were early gentile Christ-followers, such as those found in Pauline communities like Galatia, really so willing to accept circumcision in light of the stigma attached to it? The intention here is not to give an exhaustive answer, but to raise the question about whether scholarship has correctly discerned the stance of Paul's Galatian audience toward circumcision.

I find both the internal evidence of Galatians and the external evidence, which dehumanizes circumcision, to suggest that the majority of the Galatian assemblies did not want to be circumcised. From Paul's perspective, they were being coerced against their will, and coercion implies force. Thus, the burden of proof lies with those who argue that the community was ready and willing to circumcise instead of being forced to circumcise against their desire.

## 2. Forcing the Galatians to Circumcise

Much of the internal textual evidence that might contribute to our understanding of the Galatians' desire to circumcise is ambiguous, and tells us little beyond Paul's own rhetoric about the situation. For example, in the first chapter of Galatians, Paul repeatedly speaks about how they are turning away to a different gospel (Gal 1:6, 9). He later contends that they have turned to observing special days again (4:10), an indication they are already well on their way to observing circumcision as well. In light of such evidence, the Galatians could be construed as a rebellious community who are eager to abandon Paul's circumcision-free gospel for gentiles. But no matter how hard we try to mirror-read Paul's rhetoric in passages such as these, they do not reveal anything substantial about the motivations of the Galatian community or the attitude with which they are apparently seeking out circumcision.<sup>4</sup>

However, there is one key passage that reveals a willingness to circumcise. In Gal 4:21 Paul asks: "Tell me, those who wish to be under the law, do you not hear the law?" (Λέγετέ μοι, οἱ ὑπὸ νόμον θέλοντες εἶναι, τὸν νόμον οὐκ ἀκούετε;). Gal 4:21 appears to support the claim that the Galatians wanted to circumcise, since Paul directly addresses "those who wish to be under the law" (οἱ ὑπὸ νόμον θέλοντες εἶναι). The expression "under the law" in 4:21 includes circumcision, since later in the letter Paul says the Galatians will be "obligated to

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<sup>4</sup> On the dangers of mirror-reading in Galatians, see the now classic article by John M. G. Barclay, "Mirror-Reading a Polemical Letter: Galatians as a Test Case," *JSNT* 31 (1987): 73–93.

do the whole law” (Gal 5:3) if they circumcise.<sup>5</sup> Circumcision and submission to the law are intertwined. Alternatively, it may be significant that Paul does not address the Galatians as “those who wish to be circumcised.” The Galatians might wish to be “under the law”—that is, to be faithful observers of God’s commands—while at the same time not wishing to be circumcised.

In any case, even if we take Gal 4:21 as a reference to a Galatian desire to circumcise, it is not immediately clear who Paul’s addressees are. We know that Paul does not address the agitators in 4:21 because any other time he refers to those who are “disturbing” the Galatians, he refers to them without addressing them directly (e.g., 5:7, 10, 12; 6:12, 13). Therefore, he must be speaking to the Galatian community.

Most interpreters understand Paul in 4:21 to be addressing the whole Galatian assembly, with some citing the direct address of the Galatians in 3:1 (ὧ ἀνόητοι Γαλάται) as evidence for this position.<sup>6</sup> The whole Galatian community desires to be “under the law.” However, there is evidence that in Gal 4:21 Paul only references a sub-section of the community. Longenecker argues that if Paul had intended to address only a portion of the Galatian assemblies “he would probably have used the pronoun ὑμεῖς (“you”) to identify them more precisely.”<sup>7</sup> However, this is precisely the *opposite* of how Paul uses second person pronouns throughout the letter. In almost all of the instances where the second person pronoun appears in Galatians, Paul openly addresses the entire community (Gal 1:6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 20; 2:5; 3:1, 2, 5, 28, 29; 4:11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20; 5:2, 7, 8, 10, 12, 13, 21; 6:1, 12, 13, 18). To be sure, second person addressees are implied in the two verbs Paul uses in Gal 4:21 (λέγετε and ἀκούετε). But he specifies exactly whom he is addressing; in this case, the portion of the community who actually wants to be

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<sup>5</sup> Even if one accepts Todd Wilson’s argument that the expression “under the law” (ὑπὸ νόμον) is a shorthand for being “under the curse of the law,” the ironic use in 4:21 does not negate circumcision. Todd A. Wilson, “‘Under Law’ in Galatians: A Pauline Theological Abbreviation,” *JTS* 56.2 (2005): 378–382.

<sup>6</sup> Hans-Dieter Betz, *Galatians* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 241, n.25; Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians* (WBC 41; Dallas: Word Books, 1990), 206; Dunn, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 245; Martinus C. de Boer, *Galatians: A Commentary* (NTL; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 290; Ernest de Witt Burton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1921), 252; Heinrich Schlier, *Der Brief an die Galater* (KEK; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1971), 216; Jürgen Becker, *Der Brief an die Galater* (NTD 8; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1976), 56; Franz Mußner, *Der Galaterbrief* (HThKNT 9; Frieburg: Herder, 1974), 317.

<sup>7</sup> Longenecker, *Galatians*, 206.

circumcised. This same pattern is found in Gal 5:4: “You have been released from Christ, those who are being justified in the law, you lost grace” (κατηργήθητε ἀπὸ Χριστοῦ, οἵτινες ἐν νόμῳ δικαιοῦσθε, τῆς χάριτος ἐξεπέσατε). The phrase Paul uses, οἵτινες ἐν νόμῳ δικαιοῦσθε, does not refer to the whole of the Galatian congregation but the antecedent in Gal 5:3, “any man who circumcises” (παντὶ ἀνθρώπῳ περιτεμνομένῳ).<sup>8</sup> Paul’s use of masculine plural subjects in Galatians actually serves as evidence that Paul refers to only a portion of the Galatian community in 4:21. Every time Paul specifies a grammatical subject with a masculine plural substantival expression (e.g., a noun, prepositional phrase, or verb), he spotlights a particular group of people:

- the brothers who are with him (οἱ σὺν ἐμοὶ πάντες ἀδελφοί, Gal 1:2)
- those who are confusing (οἱ ταρασσοντες, Gal 1:7)
- the acknowledged [leaders in Jerusalem] (οἱ δοκοῦντες, Gal 2:6).
- the acknowledged pillars [e.g., James, Cephas, John] (οἱ δοκοῦντες στῦλοι εἶναι, Gal 2:9)
- the rest of the Jews/Judeans (οἱ λοιποὶ Ἰουδαῖοι, Gal 2:13)
- those out of faith (οἱ ἐκ πίστεως, Gal 3:9)
- those who are disturbing (οἱ ἀνασταταοῦντες, Gal 5:12)
- those who do [the works of the flesh] (οἱ τὰ ταιαῦτα πράσσοντες, Gal 5:21)
- those who are of Christ Jesus (οἱ δὲ τοῦ Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ, Gal 5:24)
- those who are pneumatic (spiritual) (οἱ πνευματικοί, Gal 6:1)
- those who are circumcising (οἱ περιτεμνόμενοι, Gal 6:13).

Given this letter-wide pattern, it is better to understand οἱ ὑπὸ νόμον θέλοντες εἶναι in Gal 4:21 as a specification of a particular group within the Galatians rather than a general description of whole community.

Longenecker also argues that Paul’s use of inclusive personal pronouns in 4:21–5:1 indicates that the whole Galatian community is in view in Gal 4:21.<sup>9</sup> However, this argument is circular, and depends on the presumption that Gal 4:21 refers to the whole community. If Gal 4:21 refers to only a section of the community, then Paul’s inclusive personal pronouns still make sense in context, since Paul is trying to make the case from Torah that the desire of this group to be under the law jeopardizes their status as children of the free woman in Gal 4.

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<sup>8</sup> The relative clause οἵτινες ἐν νόμῳ δικαιοῦσθε is clearly restrictive since the other two clauses in Gal 5:3 depend on it for the sentence to make sense.

<sup>9</sup> Longenecker, *Galatians*, 206.

The multiplicity of Galatian assemblies (Gal 1:1) further complicates Gal 4:21 as a portrayal of the desires of the whole Galatian community. Paul worries about the internal health of the community, warning them to love one another and not devour one another (Gal 5:14–15), and later, that each should examine themselves (Gal 6:4–5) and care for the household of God (6:10). This implies *intra-communal* conflict. It is therefore more plausible that one particular assembly or a subset of a particular assembly had an interest in being under the law, rather than the whole Galatian community. We should then understand Gal 4:21 as addressing only those among the Galatian assemblies who wanted to take up circumcision.<sup>10</sup> We cannot assume that the desires of the Galatian assemblies were homogenous.

Paul's own perspective on the wider Galatian desire for circumcision is that the community were being forced against their will through coercion. The Galatians (less those who "want to be under the law") do not want to be circumcised. In Gal 6:12, Paul describes the opponents as "those who are forcing [the Galatians] to circumcise (οἱ ἀναγκάζουσιν ἡμᾶς περιτέμνεσθαι).<sup>11</sup> Many of the major English translations add a modal verb like "trying" (NRSV, NLT, NIV, NASB) or "attempting" (LEB) in order to weaken the coercive force of the verb ἀναγκάζω in Gal 6:12. The ESV translates the verb with a conditional modification: "those...who would force you to be circumcised." These modifications reflect a trend in Galatians scholarship to treat ἀναγκάζω as having "conative force," i.e., an *attempt* to compel circumcision.<sup>12</sup> However, there are a number of problems with this interpretation.

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<sup>10</sup> Wilhelm Lüttert also argued for a similar understanding of Gal 4:21: "Diese Anrede wird nur dann verständlich, wenn Paulus sich nicht an die ganze Gemeinde wendet, sondern an einen Teil derselben, an diejenigen, welche sich der judaistischen Verführung hingegeben haben" (This address can only be understood if Paul himself does not turn to the entire community, but rather to a part of it, to those who have handed themselves over to judaizing temptation). Wilhelm Lüttert, *Gesetz und Geist: Eine Untersuchung zur Vorgeschichte des Galaterbriefes* (BFCT 22/6; Gütersloch: Evangelischer Verlag, 1918), 11 (481), and noted in Betz, *Galatians*, 241 n.25.

<sup>11</sup> Barclay understands Gal 6:12 as a Pauline caricature (Barclay, "Mirror-Reading a Polemical Letter: Galatians as a Test Case," 75, 86). The opponents are not literally forcing Galatians' foreskin off. Nevertheless, if we understand Paul's language as a characterization of Galatian attitude toward this circumcision, then we need not read it as a caricature.

<sup>12</sup> E.g., Betz, *Galatians*, 315; Longenecker, *Galatians*, 291; Dunn, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 336; F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 268–269; J. Louis Martyn, *Galatians* (AB 33A; New York: Doubleday, 1997), 560; Frank J. Matera, *Galatians* (SP 9; Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 225;

Commentators make a distinction in use between the present/imperfect use of the verb ἀναγκάζω (Gal 2:14, Acts 26:11), which is supposed to be conative in force (according to BDF §319), and the aorist use of the verb (e.g., Mt 14:22; Mk 6:45; Lk 14:23; Acts 28:19), which supposedly refers to coercion that has been successful. However, the semantic difference between the present/imperfect conative and aorist resultative meanings of ἀναγκάζω is not consistent with the examples often cited. In Gal 2:14—a supposed conative present—Paul accuses Peter of “forcing gentiles to live like Jews” (πῶς τὰ ἔθνη ἀναγκάζεις Ἰουδαΐζειν). It is not an attempt, however, as they are successful. In Gal 2:12 the Jews separate themselves from the gentiles, thus enforcing mealtime segregation.<sup>13</sup> Paul interprets Peter’s action as coercive, since in order for the gentiles to eat with their Jewish brothers they would have to live Jewishly. In Acts 26:1—another instance of an alleged conative imperfect tense-form—Paul gives witness to his previous life before King Agrippa and how he forced followers of Jesus to blaspheme (καὶ κατὰ πάσας τὰς συναγωγὰς πολλάκις τιμωρῶν αὐτοὺς ἠνάγκαζον βλασφημεῖν). The portrayal of Paul in Acts, however, depicts Paul using violence against believers (7:48, 8:1–3), something he even admits to in Acts 26:11! He did not attempt to force believers to blaspheme. He coerced them through physical violence. The present and imperfect tense-forms of ἀναγκάζω can refer to successful coercive acts just as much as the aorist tense-form of the verb.

English translations and commentators who focus on an illusory conative use of ἀναγκάζω also ignore the lexical semantics of ἀναγκάζω in relation to the verb περιτέμνω in other ancient sources.<sup>14</sup> The use of ἀναγκάζω + περιτέμνω has repeatedly been understood as coercive, a circumcision that is done against

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François Vouga, *An die Galater* (HNT 10; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998), 155; Schlier, *Der Brief an die Galater*, 280; Mußner, *Der Galaterbrief*, 411. On the conative nuance, see Heinrich von Siebenthal, *Ancient Greek Grammar for the Study of the New Testament* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2019), 310 (194d), 318 (197a).

<sup>13</sup> It is unclear why exactly this mealtime segregation occurs. Various ancient sources do reinforce that Jews ate separately (Jub. 22:16; Jos. Asen. 7:1; Diodorus Siculus, *Bib. hist.* 34.1.2; Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.5.2). Still, many proposals have been put forward (e.g., the recent proposal by Paula Fredriksen that it was because they were eating in gentile households: Paula Fredriksen, *Paul: The Pagans’ Apostle* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017], 97–99) but the text does not provide enough evidence to make a firm judgment.

<sup>14</sup> John Anthony Dunne, *Persecution and Participation in Galatians* (WUNT 2/454; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 56–57, is an exception, although he portrays the situation as both conative and coercive.

the will of the person being circumcised.<sup>15</sup> For example, the historian Ptolemy (1st century BCE) describes the forced circumcision of the Idumeans after they had been subjected by the Jews during the time of Hyrcanus (κρατηθέντες δὲ ὑπ’ αὐτῶν καὶ ἀναγκασθέντες περιτέμνεσθαι).<sup>16</sup> Josephus (*Vita* 113) also describes instances where he stopped other Jews in Judaea from forcing non-Jewish political refugees to be circumcised (τούτους περιτέμνεσθαι τῶν Ἰουδαίων ἀναγκαζόντων).<sup>17</sup> Because of this established use, the phrase οὗτοι ἀναγκάζουσιν ὑμᾶς περιτέμνεσθαι in Gal 6:12 should not be translated with any modal or conditional additions, but simply as: “those who are forcing you to be circumcised.” Although the “action” of circumcision has not yet happened, the “action” of coercion has been achieved.<sup>18</sup>

In no way is this “compelling” an attempt “to get the Gentile Christians ready to accept circumcision *voluntarily*,” as Betz strangely argues, as though if the Galatians chose to take up circumcision such a choice would have been voluntary and not against their will.<sup>19</sup> An act that is done because of coercion is not a voluntary act.<sup>20</sup> From Paul’s perspective in Gal 6:12, the Galatians did not actually want to be circumcised but were being forced to do so.

Another indication that most of the Galatian community had no desire to circumcise arises from the issue of social pressure. Paul alludes to the pressure faced by the Galatians in three places. In Gal 5:12 Paul describes the influencers as “those who are disturbing” (οἱ ἀναστατοῦντες) the Galatians.<sup>21</sup> According to Paul

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<sup>15</sup> Scholars have understood the expression ἐν ἰσχύι in 1 Macc 2:46 as evidence of forced circumcision, but I have recently shown that this expression does not refer to coercion. See Isaac T. Soon, “‘In strength’ not ‘by force’: Re-reading the Circumcision of the Uncircumcised ἐν ἰσχύι in 1 Macc 2:46,” *JSP* 23.3 (2020): 149–167.

<sup>16</sup> See Menahem Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism. Volume One: From Herodotus to Plutarch* (Jerusalem: The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1976), 1.356. Cf. Josephus, *A.J.* 18.257; 15.254.

<sup>17</sup> Coercion is explicit in this passage: Simon Claude Mimouni, *La circoncision dans le monde judéen aux époques grecque et romaine: Histoire d’un conflit interne au judaïsme* (Collection de la Revue des Études juives; Leuven: Peeters, 2007), 93–94. For Josephus, consent to circumcision is expressed with the auxiliary verb θέλω (*A.J.* 20.139).

<sup>18</sup> Cf. von Siebenthal, *Ancient Greek Grammar for the Study of the New Testament*, 318 (197a).

<sup>19</sup> Betz, *Galatians*, 315.

<sup>20</sup> Bruce’s comment is typical: “If the trouble-makers insisted that circumcision was necessary to salvation, this was a *form of pressure approaching compulsion*.” Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 269, emphasis mine.

<sup>21</sup> Although it does not matter to my present argument, I understand the influencers to be judaizing gentiles, a position numerous scholars have argued in a variety of different forms since at least the beginning of the twentieth century: James Hardy Ropes, *The Singular*



in Gal 4:17, the persecution involves some form of exclusion, since he indicates that, “They [the opponents] desire you for no good, but in order to exclude you so that you desire them” (ζηλοῦσιν ὑμᾶς οὐ καλῶς, ἀλλ’ ἐκκλείσαι ὑμᾶς θέλουσιν, ἵνα αὐτοὺς ζηλοῦτε). Another reference to the social situation can be found in Gal 4:29. John Dunne reads “the child born of flesh persecuting the child born of spirit” (ὁ κατὰ σάρκα γεννηθεὶς ἐδίωκεν τὸν κατὰ πνεῦμα) as an allusion to the persecution the Galatians now face.<sup>22</sup>

The nature of this pressure on the Galatians is not clear. The agitators may expect the gentiles to observe the whole Jewish law including circumcision (e.g., Acts 15:1, 5). On the other hand, Paul’s remark in Gal 6:12 that the Galatians are being forced to circumcise so that the agitators *themselves* avoid persecution suggests otherwise. Martin Goodman argues that we should understand the origin of their social pressure in non-Jewish concerns, particularly the hostility toward the early Jesus movement as an illegitimate religion.<sup>23</sup> By attaching themselves to Judaism, gentile Jesus followers who were circumcised might be able to pass as Jewish in their social environment and thus avoid exclusion from their wider community.

Regardless of the specific circumstances, if we understand the Galatian predicament to be the result of social pressure, then we cannot say that the Galatians voluntarily chose to take up circumcision. None of the evidence in

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*Problem of the Epistle to the Galatians* (HTS 14; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1929); Hans Lietzmann, *An die Galater* (HNT 10; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1932); Emanuel Hirsch, “Zwei Fragen zu Galater 6,” *ZNW* 29 (1930): 192–197; Wilhelm Michaelis, “Judaistische Heidenchristen,” *ZNW* 30 (1931): 83–89; Johannes Munck, *Paul and the Salvation of Mankind* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1959); A. E. Harvey, “The Opposition to Paul,” in *Studia Evangelica IV. Papers presented to the Third International Congress on New Testament Studies held at Christ Church, Oxford, 1965. Part I: The New Testament Scriptures*, ed. F. L. Cross (Texte und Untersuchungen zu Geschichte der altchristlichen Literature, 102; Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1968), 319–332; Peter Richardson, *Israel in the Apostolic Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969); Michele Murray, *Playing a Jewish Game: Gentile Christian Judaizing in the First and Second Centuries CE* (Studies in Christianity and Judaism 13; Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2004); Matthew Thiessen, *Paul and the Gentile Problem* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>22</sup> John A. Dunne, “Cast Out the Aggressive Agitators’: Suffering, Identity, and the Ethics of Expulsion in Paul’s Mission to the Galatians,” in *Sensitivity to Outsiders: Exploring the Dynamic Relationship between Mission and Ethics in the New Testament and Early Christianity*, ed. Jacobus Kok, et al. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 253–255.

<sup>23</sup> Martin Goodman, “The politics of Judaea in the 50s CE: The Use of the New Testament,” *JJS* 70.2 (2019): 231–232.

Galatians betrays an intent to circumcise for circumcision itself, only an intent to circumcise in order to avoid persecution or negative social consequences. Would the influencers require the Galatians' permission to circumcise? Absolutely. But permission through coercion is not consent but constraint. If the Galatians are attempting to circumcise under constraint, then they do not want to be circumcised. What they actually want is to avoid social liminality.

### 3. The Bestial Glans: Circumcision as an Animalistic Practice

Scholarship on Galatians assumes that non-Jews would have been equally willing to circumcise as much as they would be equally willing not to circumcise. This is not to say that gentiles never got circumcised. Certainly, we have evidence that some gentiles gladly and willingly took up circumcision, like Achior the Ammonite (Judith 14:10) and Izates of Adiabene (Josephus, *A.J.* 20.34–48). But we also have an equal, if not greater, number of sources that show gentiles declining circumcision, like Epiphanes, son of Antiochus, who declined to marry Herod Agrippa's sister Drusilla because he did not want to be circumcised (Josephus, *A.J.* 20.139). There was also Polemo, king of Cilicia, who was married to Bernice, sister to Agrippa, for only a short time before forsaking his marriage and circumcision (*A.J.* 20.145). The previous analysis of evidence internal to Galatians showed that the Galatians fall within the latter camp. When we turn to the reception of circumcision outside of Galatians, it becomes clear that Paul's gentile audiences, by social and cultural default, would not have wanted to be circumcised.

In this section, I analyze the negative reception of circumcision from a previously unrecognised category of evidence, ancient *Mischwesen* (hybrid beings) as depicted in ancient visual culture. Representation in visual media, whether plastic or digital, is ideological. *What* is represented and *how* it is represented tell us a lot about the values a society imputes toward a particular image, especially when it comes to human bodies. Images of circumcision in the ancient world are rare. But where circumcision does occur, it manifests the values ancient Greeks and Romans held toward it. When ancient visual evidence is allowed to speak, it furthers our understanding of why ancient circumcision was received in the way it was by non-Jews. There are only a few scholars who have innovated in this area, namely Frederick Hodges and most recently Thomas Blanton.<sup>24</sup> Here, I build on the work of Hodges and Blanton and extend our

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<sup>24</sup> Frederick M. Hodges, "The Ideal Prepuce in Ancient Greece and Rome: Male Genital Aesthetics and Their Relation to *Lipodermos*, Circumcision, Foreskin Restoration, and the *Kynodesme*," *The Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 75.3 (2001): 375–405. Recently,

analysis of circumcision to the domain of the *monstrous*. The phallic synonymy that some ancient *Mischwesen* shared with circumcised peoples like ancient Jews suggests that Greeks and Romans would have associated Jewish circumcision with the animalistic and the sub-human.<sup>25</sup>

A number of years ago, Jeffrey Hurwit drew attention to the nudity of the male *Mischwesen* (hybrid beings) in ancient Greek sculpture and how they directly contrast the Greek heroic foreskinned ideal.<sup>26</sup> These hybrid beings, like the Minotaur or satyrs/silanoi, were theriomorphic—that is, they that all had animal traits and were only partly human. Rosemary Barrow notes that, “In a mythological world where metamorphosis from mortal to animal, or anthropomorphic god to animal, was common, Greek and Roman audiences were used to negotiating blurred boundaries between human and non-human.”<sup>27</sup> Surprisingly, some of these creatures were also often portrayed as being circumcised. Here I examine one type of *Mischwesen* that has not, to my knowledge, been considered in connection with circumcision: centaurs.

In a Roman marble copy (1st–2nd century CE) after Pergamene original (ca. 200 BCE), an elderly centaur is tortured by the god of desire, Eros.<sup>28</sup> It appears to be modeled after a similar motif to the Furietti centaurs found at Hadrian’s villa in Tivoli, now housed in the Capitoline museum. The centaur is being tortured by

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Thomas R. Blanton has focused specifically on the depiction of circumcision in the ancient iconographic evidence in relation to Philo’s defense of the rite: Thomas R. Blanton IV, “The Expressive Prepuce: Philo’s Defense of Judaic Circumcision in Greek and Roman Contexts,” *The Studia Philonica Annual* 31 (2019): 127–162. Other studies that do not concentrate on circumcision in visual culture but feature it include: Margaret C. Miller, “The Myth of Bousiris: Ethnicity and Art,” in *Not the Classical Ideal: Athens and the Construction of the Other in Greek art*, ed. Beth Cohen (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 413–442; Claude Bérard, “The Image of the Other and the Foreign Herm,” in Cohen, *Not the Classical Ideal*, 390–412. Surprisingly, Martin does not discuss any visual evidence: Troy W. Martin, “Paul and Circumcision,” in *World: A Handbook*, in *Paul in the Greco-Roman*, ed. J. Paul Sampley (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 113–142.

<sup>25</sup> Some scholars have already noted that circumcision was considered a “deformity” or “pathological disfigurement,” though without tracing the specific process by which circumcision was othered in the ancient world. See e.g., Feldman, *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World: Attitudes and Interactions from Alexander to Justinian*, 155; Hodges, “The Ideal Prepuce,” 400, 404.

<sup>26</sup> Jeffrey M. Hurwit, “The Problem with Dexileos: Heroic and Other Nudities in Greek Art,” *AJA* 111.1 (2007): 53. On the foreskin as an ideal, see Hodges, “The Ideal Prepuce.”

<sup>27</sup> R. J. Barrow, *Gender, Identity and the Body in Greek and Roman Sculpture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 153.

<sup>28</sup> Now at the Louvre Museum, Paris MA 562 (MR 122).

Eros, his hands tied behind his back and the god reaching up to his head, perhaps a gesture that signifies he is filling his head with lustful desire. Unusually the glans of the centaur is exposed, but although the body of the centaur is of a horse, the phallus is not unnecessarily large or particularly “equine-like” as is usually the case.<sup>29</sup> In fact, the penis itself looks flaccid. If this is correct, then the centaur appears circumcised. There is a convergence here of torturous sexual desire, animalistic nature, and circumcision.

This is not the only example of a centaur with his glans exposed. In a 1st century CE encaustic on white marble with red outlines from Herculaneum we find a depiction of the Centauromachy, the battle between centaurs and the Lapiths, a legendary group of people who resided in Thessaly.<sup>30</sup> (CW: rape, violence) According to the myth, the Lapith king Pirithous invited the centaurs to a banquet in celebration of his marriage to Hippodameia (see Ovid, *Metam.* 12.219–224; 12.346–349; Homer, *Od.* 21.295–304; Pausanias, *Descr.* 1.17.2, 5.10.8; Strabo, *Georg.* 939; Horace, *Carm.* 1.18.5; Pliny, *Nat.* 8.15.36.5,4). Unfortunately, the centaurs became intoxicated, and according to Ovid the wildest of the wildest centaur, Eurytus, grabbed Hippodameia by the hair, trying to kidnap her. The rest of the centaurs began to rape the women and the boys, inciting a battle between them and the Greeks, among whom Theseus was present. The encaustic from Herculaneum depicts this tale closely, with a woman being grasped by her hair, probably Hippodameia, the centaur grabbing her, possibly Eurytus, and a young Greek warrior grabbing him by the hair, possibly Theseus. What is alarming is that the centaur’s glans is exposed, the slight line of his foreskin retracted back, even while his phallus is flaccid. The centaur has been depicted as being circumcised or at least in a way that is completely negligible from circumcision. In contrast to the centaur, Theseus is depicted in the heroic nude with the ideal foreskin.

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<sup>29</sup> For example, a seventh-century BCE frieze from the Attic black-figure volute famously known as the Francois Vase, now housed at the Museo Archeologico Nazionale in Florence, depicts Hephaistos returning to Olympus riding on a mule followed by a *silenos*. The mule’s penis is noticeably club-shaped as opposed to the human-like shape of the *silenos*’s penis next to it.

<sup>30</sup> Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli 9560. It is also possible but less likely that what is depicted is Herakles, Nessos, and Deianira. For a clear overview of scholarship and the centaur primary source traditions see Jan N. Bremmer, “Greek Demons of the Wilderness: the case of the Centaurs,” in *Wilderness Mythologies*, ed. Wil L. Felt (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), 25–53. An image of the encaustic can be found on the Digital LIMC: <https://weblimc.org/page/monument/2074217>.

Although some were known for their wisdom (e.g., Cheiron), centaurs in general were known in the ancient world for their propensity for lust, as the Centauromachy, the centaur tormented by Eros, and this Herculaneum encaustic show. This desire was a part of their innate nature. In one of the origin stories, the founder of the centaurs, Kentaurus, mated with Magnesian mares on mount Pelion (Pindar, *Pyth.* 2.42-48; Philostratus, *Imag.* 2.3).<sup>31</sup> Additionally, centaurs and satyrs were also closely aligned in ancient sources, since they had so many shared characteristics including an unbridled sexual drive.<sup>32</sup> “Civilized” Greeks wanted little to do with such men.<sup>33</sup>

It is not as though this encaustic is an outlier in its depiction of a circumcised centaur. A search through the *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae* (LIMC) provides at least seven other examples of circumcised centaurs (LIMC Kentauroi et Kentaurides 180, 186, 191, 194a, 258, 268; Kenturoi in Etruria 12) depicted on ancient Greek pottery. Some of these examples share the same Centauromachy context as the Herculaneum encaustic (e.g., LIMC Kentauroi et Kentaurides 186 and 191).<sup>34</sup> Here, we have found a previously unrecognized pattern of circumcision among ancient Greek and Roman depictions of centaurs, portrayals that explicitly associate circumcision with the hypersexual and the bestial.

Circumcision was not the only feature that barbarians shared with ancient *Mischwesen*. Hybrid beings, such as the Lystrygonians (man-eating giants), Polyphemous the Cyclops, and the Minotaur from Minos in ancient Greek mythology were associated with cannibalism. Even Cheiron, the wisest centaur and mentor to Achilles, was at one point linked with human sacrifices.<sup>35</sup> In the ancient world, human sacrifices, animal sacrifices, and eating meat could not be so easily separated.<sup>36</sup> When human sacrifices are mentioned it is therefore

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<sup>31</sup> Another origin account of the centaurs begins with a group of men raised by nymphs, cf. Diodorus Siculus, *Bib. hist.* 4.70.1. Often the myths account of the origins of particular centaurs rather than all centaurs together. William F. Hansen, *Handbook of Classical Mythology* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2004), 135.

<sup>32</sup> Robin Osborne, “Framing the centaur: reading fifth-century architectural sculpture,” in *Art and Text in Ancient Greek Culture*, eds. Simon Goldhill and Robin Osborne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 54, 56.

<sup>33</sup> Bremmer, “Greek Demons of the Wilderness: the case of the Centaurs,” 20.

<sup>34</sup> Images of LIMC 186 can be found here: <https://weblimc.org/page/monument/2073490>.

Images of LIMC 191 can be found here: <https://weblimc.org/page/monument/2073466>.

<sup>35</sup> This is the argument based on Monimus (4th century BCE) *apud* Clement of Alexandria, *Protr.* 3.42 by Bremmer, “Greek Demons of the Wilderness: the case of the Centaurs,” 34.

<sup>36</sup> Dennis D. Hughes, *Human Sacrifice in Ancient Greece* (London: Routledge, 1991), 188.

likely that cannibalism is implied. Ancient Greeks knew of cannibalistic barbarian tribes like the Androphagi (Herodotus, *Hist.* 4.18). But cannibalism was also associated with peoples who practiced circumcision, such as the Egyptians. For example, King Busiris was known to sacrifice (and therefore eat the flesh of) foreigners, hence his attempt to capture Herakles and make an offering of him (Herodotus, *Hist.* 2.45; Pseudo-Apollodorus, *Bibl.* 2.5.11). Cassius Dio also records a certain group of people called the Bucoli who led a revolt in Egypt, eventually sacrificing and eating a Roman centurion (Dio Cassius, *Hist. rom.* 72.4).

In addition to the Egyptians, however, Jews too were associated with cannibalism. One of our earliest extant anti-Jewish claims was that they celebrated annual cannibalistic rites. Josephus records Apion's claim (in *C. Ap.* 2.91–96) that Antiochus stumbled upon a Greek in the Jerusalem temple who was being fattened up for sacrifice whom the Jews would then eat according to an “unmentionable law” (2.94).<sup>37</sup> At the climax of Apion's cannibalistic narrative is the antipathy the Jews swear toward the Greeks each year during the ritual (2.95).<sup>38</sup> In numerous instances, authors argued cannibalism was regressive behavior that reflected pre-civilization (Plato, [*Epin.*] 975a–b; Pausanias, *Descr.* 8.42.6; Plutarch, *Is. Os.* 13 [356A]; Diodorus Siculus, *Bib. hist.* 1.14). Pieter van der Horst has shown, based on a close reading of the sources, how the cannibalistic behavior of humans was depicted using animalistic language, terms like *θηριώδης* and *ἀγριώδης*.<sup>39</sup> When Apion associated cannibalism with Jews, the connotation was that somehow these barbarian peoples never developed past their uncivilised and thus animalistic tendencies. As van der Horst argues, in these anti-barbarian polemics, “Jews were ‘Untermenschen’ [sub-human]. They did have laws, but those laws commanded them to perform rituals that make clear that they still lived the lives of animals, *thêriôdeis bioi*. As cannibals they were in fact lawless, primitive, immoral, and violent creatures.”<sup>40</sup> The circumcision of hybrid beings created a correspondence with cannibalistic barbarians, giving the bodies of circumcised Jewish men animalistic overtones, distorting both them and their laws which command them to mutilate their bodies and devour civilized men. It is no surprise, then, that the Galatians would have been reluctant to take on

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<sup>37</sup> John M. G. Barclay, *Against Apion* (Flavius Josephus: Translation and Commentary; Leiden: Brill, 2007), 220.

<sup>38</sup> For full comments see Barclay, *Against Apion*, 219–220.

<sup>39</sup> Pieter W. van der Horst, *Studies in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity* (Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity 87; Leiden: Brill, 2014), 184.

<sup>40</sup> van der Horst, *Studies in Ancient Judaism*, 185.

circumcision. While circumcision was a sign of the covenant for Jews, to the Greek and Romans it was a monstrous nudity.

#### 4. Conclusion

Rather than finding evidence that the Galatians embraced circumcision, I have found that the opposite is the case. While there were some who wanted to be under the law (Gal 4:21), the wider Galatian community had no actual desire for circumcision. Circumcision was being thrust upon the Galatians against their will. It is not surprising given the stigma in ancient Greek and Roman cultures attached to circumcision that the Galatians would have had to be coerced to be circumcised. From a non-Jewish perspective, the visual correspondence with circumcised centaurs infused circumcision with hypersexual and bestial qualities. Circumcision connoted the subhuman, the hybrid, the uncivilized, and the deformed. It is from this Graeco-Roman default that scholars should understand the relationship between Paul's non-Jewish audience and circumcision.

The underlying principle behind the assumption that the Galatians wanted to be circumcised is that the burden of proof lies with those who want to argue the opposite. However, Paul's portrayal of the Galatian circumcision as coercion, along with the social pressure he argues both the Galatians and the agitators face, suggest otherwise. Indeed, the wider Graeco-Roman stigma attached to circumcision indicates that the burden of proof is on those who argue that gentiles would be amicably inclined to be circumcised. While there are some examples of gentiles who took on circumcision willingly without being coerced, there are just as many instances of gentiles who refused or declined circumcision. The baseline assumption with which interpreters should approach Galatians should be that a majority of the Galatian community did not want to be circumcised at all and not that Paul combats some assembly-wide desire for the practice.

There is another way of conceiving the Galatian attitude toward circumcision that might take seriously the antipathy non-Jews had toward the Jewish rite. Perhaps the Galatians feigned an interest in becoming circumcised due to the pressure they were facing, when in reality they knew it conflicted with their bodily ideals but did not have the apostolic authority themselves to fully exclude it. Perhaps Paul's polemical letter was exactly what the Galatians were looking for. Perhaps his anti-circumcision gospel for gentile believers was precisely what they *wanted* to hear.